

## After the Funeral by maplemood

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**Summary:**

*“Steve,”* he gasps, and, fuck, that one word is all it takes. All it’s ever going to take, Steve thinks as he digs through the pockets of his dad’s hand-me-down suit for his keys.

“I got you, man. Come on.”

## After the Funeral

Bob Newby's funeral—aside from being fucking tragic and awful; Steve didn't know the man from Adam but Mrs. Byers' face tells him Bob was one of the good ones, one of the ones who didn't deserve being digested in the gut of a slit-faced interdimensional monster—brings out all kinds of little groupings in a group he already never would have expected. Through most of the service, the Byerses cluster together, Nancy, hand in hand with Jonathan, lingering on the outskirts (and that stings, but it doesn't *hurt*, so he takes what he can get). In the last few minutes, though, the cluster breaks apart: suddenly Jonathan's slumped next to Hopper, bearing up a little when Chief squeezes his shoulder. Nance has one arm around Will and the other around Max, who knew Bob about as well as Steve did but wears the same face as everyone else, empty and watery. Wheeler Junior finds his way over to Mrs. Byers.

"I had to pull her up," he whispered to Lucas while Steve and Dustin wrestled the demodog corpse into the fridge, pretending not to listen. "Right after Hopper pulled her out, and she was screaming—"

"Sweetheart," Mrs. Byers says now, simple as that, and wraps her arms around him. Mike doesn't even roll his eyes.

*What do you know*, Steve thinks, before he realizes someone beside him is crying.

Not sniffing, either. Full-blown, pit-of-the-stomach, marathon sobs. It takes him another second to look over, because this is all so goddamn weird, so far from any reality he ever pictured himself in. When he does guilt stabs him between the eyes like an oncoming headache.

It's Dustin.

The kid's hunched over, knotted fists swinging helplessly at his sides. He's trying to stop, like he can sense eyes on him, sense all the crumbling dignity you don't have at thirteen drifting even farther out of reach, but his shoulders shake. His entire body shakes, and when he finally lifts his head his face is soaked and twisted, flushed tomato-red and beyond help.

“Steve,” he gasps, and, fuck, that one word is all it takes. All it’s ever going to take, Steve thinks as he digs through the pockets of his dad’s hand-me-down suit for his keys.

“I got you, man. Come on.”

After a couple muttered words to Hopper, who relays them to Mrs. Henderson, he hustles Dustin down to his car. A two-bit convenience store, mostly deserted, sags just a block from the cemetery. He pulls around to the back, next to a steaming dumpster. Parks.

Dustin’s still going at it strong, so much so that for a second Steve worries he won’t be able to catch his breath. The kid’s on the verge of a goddamn asthma attack and he just drove him away from the town sheriff, what the hell, Harrington—he unbuckles, scrambles out and around to the passenger side, gets the door open.

“Hey,” he says. Helpless himself. “Dipshit—”

He’s about to say, *Don’t cry*, which is just...friggin’ something else, considering this was the entire reason he drove Dustin over here, so he could bawl and blubber his heart out without having to let everyone else see, without running to his mom. Maybe that’s what Dustin needs, though, a mom, somebody to hold him, somebody who knows what to—

The seatbelt clicks loose. For a solid five seconds he can’t breathe; the arms wrapped around his middle squeeze too tight.

“He played D&D with us.” Dustin breathes one gulping gush somewhere into the region of Steve’s ribs. “‘Cause sometimes—after—we’d play at Will’s house instead when J—J—Jonathan couldn’t pick him up—” He sucks down another breath, spits it right back out. “—he was so nice. He was cool, he was so *good*, and he didn’t *fucking deserve that*, Steve, he didn’t—”

There’s a trembling working through his core, right about where Dustin’s face is pressed, and as he cups the back of the kid’s head in his hands, thinking there are so many people who didn’t deserve that, Bob, Barb, Will, Eleven, thinking the same useless tangle of words his mom used to chant when he was a kid, *baby, don’t you cry on me*,

*baby, baby*, all he can say, the single thing he can work out from all this mess, is, “I’m sorry. Dustin? I’m *sorry* .”

Just like that, the head pops up. Closer to purple-faced now, Dustin splutters, “Yeah? What the hell do you have to be sorry for?”

He glares, but he doesn’t make a move to shake his head out of Steve’s hands, and Steve, for his part, doesn’t drop his hands. For who knows how long they’re stuck in this tableau that must look god awful weird to anyone driving by, *Cult Ritual Beside a Dumpster* . He actually sees the headline, front page news now that the Lab’s been emptied. All Steve can think is, if anyone sees, and gives him shit over this—if anyone gives Dustin shit over this—he won’t be responsible for whatever he does next.

Split his own face open, most likely. He’s a shit fighter, always has been, but for these kids, this kid? He’ll do anything.

It pops into his head so easily. Like nothing.

Steve wonders how long he’s known this.

And Dustin is still glaring.

He says, “Shit, bud, I’m just...I’m sorry any of this happened, all right? I’m sorry you had to go through this.”

Dustin snuffles. “Are you crying?”

Is he? Steve hawks something slimy and wet to the back of his throat and says, “We were just at a funeral. Jesus, what else am I supposed to be doing?”

“I don’t know, staring off into the middle distance? Like a badass?”

Merciless. “Watch it, Henderson.” He finally unlocks his hands to swat at the back of Dustin’s skull. “Your ass is grass,” he mutters. There’s no heat behind it.

Dustin shakes it off. His head droops, though. He’s still sitting in the passenger seat, swiveled sideways; his forehead knocks against Steve’s ribs again.

"I'm not," he says.

"Not sorry?" Steve asks, probably sounding more disbelieving than he should. He stares at Dustin's head, the burst of his curls, words gumming around his skull like the fug from a bad hangover.

"If none of this happened, you'd still be some jock asshole who'd never talk to me because I'm just a dumb kid. So, yeah, Steve, I'm not sorry it happened. Any of it!" Dustin lifts his head, face burning up, half pissed, half ashamed, half every other feeling currently swirling through Steve's gut. "Don't be a pussy," he says, scrubbing at his nose. "You aren't, either."

*Kid*, he thinks. *Kid*—

"We should be," Dustin says, his voice small again, cracking at the edges. "But we're not."

He's standing up. He's standing up, then his face is mashed to Steve's collarbone, so hard and fast Steve rocks back, almost loses his balance. Dustin plows ahead, his arms squeezing, this time around Steve's shoulders; Steve's arms are around him, one hand cupped back to his head, and, shit, it's a good thing the little dope is squeezing so hard, because something inside Steve feels ready to burst apart.

For a good while, they don't say anything else.

Steve's the first to let go, because he has to be. "Fine," he says, a little hoarse, a little shaky. "I'll play that dumbass game with you all. Is that what you want, huh? 'Cause I'll do it. Okay? I will."

Dustin snorts. Still too watery, but they're getting there. Small steps, right? "Man," he says, "you're gonna frickin' suck."

"Yeah, probably." He's no good at board games. He jiggles the keys in his pocket. "You want to go in? Grab a soda or something?" He realizes he's dropped his eyes to the ground and raises them, faces Dustin head-on. "I gotta take another minute," he admits. "Before I can go back there."

"Me, too," Dustin says. He yanks at his tie, and Steve sighs.

“That thing’s too tight, didn’t anyone ever show you—shit, whatever, come here—”

They walk in together, side by side.

**Author’s Note:**

Yep, no song lyric titles this time! I pounded this one out over about two hours last night, and hopefully the seams don't show too much--the fist couple lines had been stuck in my head for awhile.